

Je Veux

Vienna 1975–2022, Galerie Meyer Kainer Kunst

Curated by Brigitte Huck

19 November 2022 – 28 January 2023

The exhibition *Je Veux* surveys the activities of Vienna gallery owners Christian Meyer and Renate Kainer from 1975 (Galerie Metropol, together with Georg Kargl) to the present (Galerie Meyer Kainer), documenting their contribution to the city's art scene.

At the end of the 1980s, a new type of gallery appeared in Vienna's city center—a gallery for contemporary art less interested in competition than in art practice itself, in theoretical instruments, analysis, and discourse. Its program would be determined by internationally renowned conceptual artists as well as young, avant-garde practitioners of context art. Pioneers were at work here, setting out with their troupe of artists like explorers on a voyage of discovery.

Going well beyond the mere business of running a gallery, the team would devote itself to areas of activity far removed from the market, fostering public art, discussions and debates, participating in international art and culture initiatives, and exuding an almost poetic dissatisfaction with the reality of commerce.

The exhibition *Je Veux* reflects the gallery's program: From today's perspective, it turns out to be a work in progress consisting of assemblage, controversy, and polemics. Art as the result of "wrong seeing, odd thinking" and "strange action." ¹⁾

The thematic issues that would come to be addressed in the gallery's programming can be characterized as follows: Initial considerations regarding the autonomy of form and problems of formalism, expanded to include an intensive examination of gender and representation, and joined by a firm commitment to the institutional critique of conceptual artists ranging from Andrea Fraser to Dan Graham.

Creating a résumé of activities spanning several decades demands a degree of thematic delimitation, and so the exhibition *Je Veux* directs its attention to social forms of expression and anthropological traces in work that has determined the course of the gallery's exhibitions. They form an associative sequence that aims to establish relationships and stimulate dialogues—between the works themselves, but also between the work and the viewer.

The presentation focuses on the following motifs: The Power of Women, Funny Games, Childhood, L'informe, Traces and an "Encore" (Zugabe).

The narrative begins with the **Power of Women** (Franz West), a catwalk for mannequins—figures whose gender remains largely neutral.

Leaning casually against the wall, wearing the head of socialist partisan fighter Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and a 1920s haute couture dress by Madeleine Vionnet, a mannequin by **Lucy McKenzie** meets *Catherine the Peter* by Estonian Space Oddity **Kris Lemsalu** in a three-dimensional fusion of fashion, sculpture, photography, and painting. Lemsalu's mythical creature is dreamlike figure from an alternate world, the alter ego of an artist who portrays the bizarre as simply superior and the grotesque as highly appealing and attractive. Excerpted from the context of the gallery's recent exhibition *Camouflage*, Catherine wears an opulent pink outfit unearthed by the artist from the depths of her costume collection. **Heimo Zobernig** continues with the bronze casting of a human figure of unstable gender—part of a series originally conceived for the Austrian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Art Biennale, it reveals the process of its making with cut casting channels and visible welds. Among this ensemble, it is the only character to whom one might ostensibly ascribe masculine attributes. A seated mannequin that Zobernig has fitted into an IKEA Billy shelf, on the other hand, displays its naturalistic details like cinematic body painting, calling to mind the veiled women of the *Cappella Sansevero* in Naples.

On the ceiling, an orangutan (*Funky Monkey, What Are You Afraid Of*, 2017) by **Anne Speier** swings elegantly on a rope around a partly galvanized, partly corroded scaffolding pole by **Anita Leisz** (Untitled, 2018/2022), a synthesis of an architecturally functional caryatid and the erotically tinged pole dance practiced by women as a sport and ambivalent expression of empowerment.

On the walls, Andy Warhol's ritualistic *Screen Tests* are given new life: oil sketches by a chronicler of glamour, **Marcin Maciejowski**, on the subject of the Academy Awards (*Red Carpet 1-4, sketch VIP*); **Charles Ray's** homage to the supermodel Tatjana Patitz, a subversive display of attractiveness in snapshots (*The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, 1993, 9 C-prints), to which *Parkett* magazine dedicated the cover of issue no. 37/1993; as well as **Wolfgang Tillmans'** work for *Vogue* (Kate Moss, US *Vogue*, Feb. 1997). Meanwhile **Rachel Harrison** uses collage to fuse Diego Velázquez's *Infanta Margarita* from Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum with a social media image of the 2021 storming of the US Capitol into tenuous matter (*Infanta Margarita*, 2021).

The **Power of Women**, represented as a kind of dance of mannequins around a virtual center, is a personal but also political force that tolerates no other authority—it no longer demands a relationship to a man and ultimately prevails through social competence.

A partition wall by **Heimo Zobernig**, an exquisite room divider, serves as a transition to the second chapter, which is devoted to the **Funny Games** of families as an experimental arrangement.

Rosemarie Trockel's legendary series of family portraits (Untitled (*Father*), 1995) uses works on paper and plaster of Paris to lay bare the character of her family members; she brushes her father's hair against the grain, "styling" his face with her fingers into an expressive relief and total unrecognizability.

The non-visibility of the faces of **gelatin's** "mirrored" Janus heads likewise shifts the expression of their character to the special emphasis on the hair, which seems to become the external aspect of inner causes, a stirring of the spirit, a symptomatic movement. Attributes of imprinting, as fed by collective memory, are reflected in the characteristics of the hair.

The psychological conditionality that the sculptures evoke leads effortlessly to **Bruce Nauman's** anarchistic slapstick video (*Violent Incident*, 1986, video for *Parkett* No. 10, "Man/Woman" segment). Oscillating between hostility and comedy, this existential memorandum was described by Nauman himself as the result of his frustration with the human condition.

The chapter **Childhood** opens with **Yoshitomo Nara's** rebellious, often justifiably angry children (*Thinking Pinky*, 2008, *Standing Alone*, 2004). The motifs are freighted with affective impulses and empathy, exposing a present that has little use for the emotional state of its offspring.

From Nara's animistic comics at Nara to **Mathias Poledna's** Walt Disney-like animations. A small selection from the thousands of analog drawings required to realize Poledna's three-minute 35mm film *Imitation of Life*, which was created as Austria's contribution to the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. The twittering of birds leads the viewer from lyrical nature to the realm of zoology, to the species giraffe. Already well-established in the art world as shrill exotics (Niko Pirosmanni) and stuffed political objects (Peter Friedl), they are now presented by **Raphaella Vogel** as ghostly skeletons from the panic room. *Wo is? Auf Klo* is an abridged version of her piece *Können oder Müssen*, which, following its appearance at Galerie Meyer Kainer, was presented at the Venice Biennale 2022.

Climbing from Vogel's white skeletons to Michèle Pagel's mobile of projectiles and sausages on the top floor, the transition functions as an **Encore** (*Zugabe*, Franz West), or perhaps as a thoroughly Dadaist interlude reminiscent of the surreal film sequences from René Clair's *L'entr'acte* from 1924. The mezzanine is left in the hands of the gallery's two grand seigneurs: **Rudolf Stingel** and **Franz West**, whose jointly produced *Lemurenheim* rattled Salzburg's celebrities' understanding of art when it was presented in 2002. Stingel's golden graffiti, a modern pala d'oro, (Untitled, 2012) was created by galvanizing the (silvery) Celotex panels that the artist left for the public to scrawl on for many years. Invited to wreak havoc or collaborate, visitors leave traces of their passage, in this case specifically across Stingel's bright orange carpeting: an irritating, psychedelic color field; a pure presence of color with the gallery space, in whose synthetic pile gestures can be drawn and erased again by anyone.

Beginning in 1985, Franz West would turn from the experientially physical *Passstücke* to autonomous sculpture, conceived of as a vehicle for mental processes and formed from odds and ends, papier-mâché, and plaster. Adding texts, titles, and found words, these become an essential part of the work. An interest in turn-of-the-century Viennese art led to pieces such as *Zugabe* (Encore), 1987, a Formica panel textured with plaster and covered in gold leaf, which West dedicated to the "golden" Klimt. This would form the basis for a series of cast Adaptives that were to be presented in an entirely gilded room in the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, though this was ultimately never realized due to the cost.

The two collages *Je Veux* by Franz West refer to French artist Sébastien de Ganay's art book imprint Onestar Press. De Ganay invited 230 artists to contribute to an exhibition in book form, *Je Veux* (*I Want*). West showed collages of the same name in the 2004 exhibition *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore* at Galerie Meyer Kainer. Christian Meyer used a version of *Je Veux* (for which West portrayed him) as the title of the recent eponymous publication.

On the top floor, **Traces** collect around the Boltenstern.Bar.

Keith Haring's door (Untitled, 1981) recalls the gallery's years on Manhattan's Madison Avenue (1980-1990). With its cultural and artistic diversity, the input and openness of a lively Viennese émigré community, and new urban forms of expression, New York became an essential partner city. Subway Art in particular became a focal point that would influence the gallery's future programming.

Cartoons, comics, and text intermingle in the drawing of **Raymond Pettibon**. The artist, who has long had close ties to Meyer Kainer, conjures up a subcultural chaos within which political concerns can be discerned, yet are never defined in detail.

Finally, **Richard Prince** graces a joke (*I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name*) with two scribbled hearts for Colin de Land, the legendary director of American Fine Arts, friend of Meyer Kainer, and unforgettable key figure of the avant-garde on the sidewalks of New York.

The end of the exhibition is dedicated to **L'informe**, the formless. For her disturbing series of *Disasters & Fairy Tales*, **Cindy Sherman** abandons figuration and enters the terrain of Abject Art, with its taboo subjects and nasty substances. Commissioned by *Vanity Fair*, the series was never published due to its frightening content.

On the ceiling, a mobile by **Michèle Pagel**. She fires and glazes household objects made from bricks she produces herself. Pagel's hanging sausages and—according to rumor—bombs are allegories of everyday life and its dangers. They dangle gently in the wind, balancing wit and morbidity. The material is heavy, the gesture light. Banality and normality, convention versus lunacy, dread, and horror. Sculptures that can laugh at their own harmony, beauty, and comical context.

According to Georges Bataille, L'informe is a concept that permits no definition. Which means, of course, that things cannot be defined. The exhibition thus undermines the idea that the production of form is the prerequisite of art; on the contrary, it aspires to an art setting out to undo form.

As a final encore, a video of a 1992 lecture by **Colin de Land**, given as part of the symposium *Das Ästhetische Feld* curated by Christian Meyer and Ulf Wuggenig for the University of Applied Arts. The participants were Peter Fend, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Jeff Koons, Colin de Land, Christian Philipp Müller, Raymond Pettibon, Gerwald Rockenschaub, Jessica Stockholder, and Peter Weibel.

As Andrea Fraser wrote: "Colin [de Land] created one of the best performances I have ever seen. It was for a lecture series at the Hochschule für angewandte Kunst in Vienna. He was really nervous about reading the text he wrote, which was a critical reflection on the way nostalgia and historical amnesia allow regressive tendencies to be legitimized and rewarded by the art market (somehow by way of Fried's 'Art and Objecthood'). Don't Look Back was projected behind the lectern while Rambo III, Female Trouble, and Andy Warhol's Dracula played on three monitors to the side. At one point 'Diamonds and Rust' came up on the PA system and drowned out his reading, so he sat down and took a cigarette break. There was his silhouette, smoking, cut out of the projection of Bob Dylan being chased down by groupies, with Sylvester Stallone holding a machine gun, Divine in a crib, and Joan Baez singing 'Now you're telling me, you're not nostalgic, then give me another word for it ...' Suddenly, out of apparent chaos, emerged a profoundly precise and affecting confrontation of cynicism and loss, and a reminder of what's lost to cynicism."

Brigitte Huck

¹⁾ Seth Price, "Wrong Seeing, Odd Thinking, Strange Action," in: *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 106, June 2017

An eponymous 808 page publication will be released by the publishing house of the Walther und Franz König bookshop to coincide with the exhibition *Je Veux*.